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Greenwire: EPA to remove contamination from Libby homes and businesses

ASBESTOS

U.S. EPA Administrator Christie Whitman announced yesterday that the federal government will remove asbestos-contaminated soil and insulation from homes in Libby, Mont., during the five-year federal cleanup project (Andrew Schneider, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 10).

Thursday's decision will allow the homes to be cleaned without having to declare a public emergency for the area surrounding W.R. Grace's now-defunct vermiculite mine, which has been blamed for hundreds of asbestos-related deaths. W.R. Grace opposed the public emergency declaration, since it would trigger a cleanup of the estimated 15 million homes across the country that use Zonolite insulation (*Greenwire*, April 15). Previously the EPA thought a public declaration was the only legal way it could gain access to clean private homes and businesses. But "the public health emergency carries with it a whole lot of other implications," said EPA Region 8 Administrator Jack McGraw, including a possible lengthy court battle.

McGraw said Libby is the most asbestos-contaminated town in America and residents are exposed to the contamination from multiple sources due to the proximity of the mine. Hundreds of homes in Libby are contaminated with asbestos found in Zonolite insulation, produced from the vermiculite ore W.R. Grace mined from 1963 to 1990. And many homeowners conditioned their soils and gardens with vermiculite. More than 200 deaths and hundreds of illnesses in the Libby area are attributed to asbestos contamination, and the entire town is expected to be listed as a federal Superfund site later this year.

Former miner and Libby resident LeRoy Thom said he was pleased with EPA's decision and unconcerned that a public health emergency was not declared. "This means that there's an end in sight. The community is going to be cleaned up, and the community is going to be able to go on once this is done," Thom said.

But Dr. Brad Black, Lincoln County health officer and

director of the local asbestos-related diseases clinic, wants the declaration. Black: "We were told (by Whitman earlier this year) that Libby had to have special declaration of a public health emergency in order to come into private establishments. What we'd like to see is to have this formally placed in writing" (Ericka Schenck Smith, *Billings Gazette*, May 10). -- MV

For additional information, please contact Rich Lathrop.

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